

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW POUCH
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMEMBASSY VINETINAE
CINCPAC HONOLULU
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 BANGKOK 11555

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD AND COMIPAC

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINS, PBOR, ECON, VM, CB
SUBJ: A WESTERNER'S ASSESSMENT OF CONDITIONS IN VIET-NAM

SUMMARY: A RECENT WESTERN VISITOR TO THE SRV FOUND VIET-NAM
STYMIED ECONOMICALLY BY AN INFLEXIBLE, CENTRALIZED BUREAUCRACY
AND PARTY, DISAPPOINTED WITH ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH THE
WEST AND TURNING INCREASINGLY TO THE SOVIET UNION. HE
FOUND DISILLUSIONMENT WIDESPREAD IN THE SOUTH AMONG NORTHERN
CADRES, WHO NOW QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY OF HANOI'S WARTIME
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CLAIMS, AND AMONG SOUTHERNERS, YOKED WITH A CORRUPT,
IDEOLOGICAL REGIME. ADDING TO THE STRAIN IS A BEWILDERING
WAR WITH CAMBODIA. END SUMMARY.

1. CENTRALIZED INFLEXIBILITY IN HANOI. A PERCEPTIVE
WESTERN JOURNALIST, WHO VISITED VIET-NAM FOR THREE WEEKS
IN MARCH, CONCLUDED THAT HANOI IS POORLY ORGANIZED TO COPE

WITH THE ECONOMIC CRISIS VIET-NAM FACES. THE JOURNALIST HAD ACCESS TO A NUMBER OF WESTERN AMBASSADORS, SENIOR SRV OFFICIALS AND IN THE SOUTH A WIDE RANGE OF CADRES AND CITIZENS. SHARING HIS THOUGHTS WITH US, HE SAID THAT THE TOP LEADERSHIP APPEARS TO BE NATIONALIST AND COMMUNIST, BUT THEIR SUBORDINATES ARE OPPORTUNISTS, LOOKING PRINCIPALLY AFTER THE WELFARE OF THEIR FAMILIES. THE BUREAUCRACY AND THE PARTY ARE SUFFERING FOR "FUNCTIONAL ARTERIOSCLEROSIS", THE JOURNALIST COMMENTED. ONLY THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT SEEMS CAPABLE OF REJUVENATING THE NATION, SEEMINGLY EXHAUSTED FROM THE LONG WAR. THE OVER-RIDING PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM OF TOTAL CENTRALIZATION WHICH STRONGLY INHIBITS RESOLUTION OF PROBLEMS. THERE APPEARS TO BE LITTLE OR NO FLEXIBILITY. DECENTRALIZATION OF DECISION-MAKING IS ESSENTIAL, THE JOURNALIST COMMENTED, BUT DOCTINAIRE HABITS OF THE PAST SEEM TO PREVAIL.

2. AID FROM THE WEST. SEVERAL AMBASSADORS AGREED THAT BECUASE OF INFLEXIBILITY HANOI HAS BEEN UNABLE TO ABSORB EFFECTIVELY WESTERN AID. AS A RESULT, THE VIETNAMESE SEEM NOW TO DOUBT THAT AID FROM THE WEST IS AS SUITABLE OR USEFUL AS HANOI EARLIER THOUGHT. MOREOVER, REACTING TO THE DIFFICULT SITUATION, SUCH AS BUREAUCRATIC DELAYS AND VIETNAMESE INSISTENCE THAT FOREIGN NATIONS PROVIDE THE AID AND LEAVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THEIR PLANS TO HAOI, PROSPECTS OF THE REAL AID NEEDED BY VIET-NAM COMING FROM THE WEST
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ARE MORE AND MORE REMOTE. FAILURE TO NORMALIZE OR RECEIVE AID FROM THE UNITED STATES IS OF COURSE ALSO A SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT OF THE PICTURE. BECAUSE OF TENSIONS RISING WITH CHINA OVER THE CAMBODIAN BORDER CONFLICT, PEKING IS LESS AND LESS LIKELY TO TRY TO ASSIST THE VIETNAMESE. THE AMBASSADORS OBSERVED THAT HANOI IS TURNING INCREASINGLY TO THE SOVIET UNION, "THEIR PROVEN ALLY FROM WHOM HELP HAS ALWAYS COME IN TIMES OF TROUBLE," IN THE WORDS OF ONE ENVOY. A COROLLARY OF THIS HAS BEEN INCREASED SOVIET PRESSURE, ATTEMPTING TO CURB HANOI'S DESIRE TO DEVELOP RELATIONS WITH THE WEST. WHEN PREMIER PHAM VAN DONG VISITED PARIS IN APRIL, 1977, HE WISHED TO VISIT SEVERAL OTHER WEST EUROPEAN CAPITALS. IN FACT HE ONLY VISITED FRANCE, THE JOURNALIST WAS TOLD, BECAUSE OF SOVIET PRESSURE, PLUS POOR PLANNING ON THE VIETNAMESE PART. (FOR EXAMPLE, HANOI WAITED UNTIL VERY LATE TO PROPOSE TO THE HAGUE A VISIT TO THE NETHERLANDS. THE HAGUE DECLINED TO EXTEND AN INVITATION.)

3. CORRUPTION. CORRUPTION ALSO LEVIES A HEAVY TOLL. THE JOURNALIST FOUND GREATER DISPARITIES OF WEALTH IN NORTH VIET-NAM THAN IN EUROPE. CADRES IN HANOI LIVE LIVES OF CLEAR PRIVILEGE, HE SAID. THEY ARE DRIVEN IN CHAUFFEURED

AUTOMOBILES AND HAVE SPECIAL MEDICAL CARE IN A HOSPITAL AVAILABLE ONLY TO GOVERNMENT AND PARTY WORKERS. THERE IS AN AWARENESS OF HOW FAR A CADRE CAN GO WITHOUT ENDANGERING HIMSELF. HOWEVER, THE FAMILY IS STILL THE MOST IMPORTANT ALLEGIANCE, AND, THEREFORE, THE CADRES FEEL NO COMPUNCTION ABOUT CORRUPTION BECAUSE THEY ARE CORRUPT FOR THEIR FAMILIES' SAKE.

4. DISILLUSIONED NORTHERNERS. THE REAL REWARD FOR A NORTHERN CADRE, HOWEVER, IS TO BE SENT TO THE SOUTH WHERE, AS ONE CADRE ADMITTED, "YOU CAN SEE THE REAL VIET-NAM." LIFE IS MUCH BETTER IN THE SOUTH AND SO CONTRADICTORY TO WHAT HANOI HAS SAID FOR YEARS THAT THE LEGITIMACY OF THE REGIME IS SERIOUSLY UNDERMINED, THE JOURNALIST CONCLUDED.
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"UP UNTIL NOW POVERTY COULD BE EXPLAINED AS A SACRIFICE FOR THE WAR, BUT NO MORE," ONE NORTHERN CADRE COMMENTED TO HIM IN THE SOUTH. NORTHERN CADRES AND SOLDIERS ALIKE SENT SOUTH HAVE BEEN DISILLUSIONED AND CORRUPTED BY CONDITIONS IN THE SOUTH. "THE NORTHERNERS ARE BEGINNING TO DRESS LIKE US," ONE SOUTHERNER TOLD THE REPORTER.

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CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD AND COMIPAC

"MANY CADRES IN SMALL GROUPS SAY THINGS WHICH, IF KNOWN, WOULD BE VERY DANGEROUS FOR THEM". ONE CADRE FROM HANOI SAID THAT HE WAS "FINISHED WITH THEM (HANOI). THE ECONOMIC LIFE IN THE SOUTH IS WHAT WE WANT, BUT CANNOT PROVIDE IT."

5. DISILLUSIONED SOUTHERNERS. SOUTHERNERS THEMSELVES TAKE A SOMEWHAT MORE BITTER VIEW. AFTER SAYING THAT IT WAS DANGEROUS TO TALK WITH A FOREIGNER, "THAT IS THE TASK OF MFA," A TEACHER TALKED AT LENGTH WITH THE JOURNALIST
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ABOUT THE NEW VIET-NAM. HE SPOKE OF BOOK BURNINGS IN 1976, BECAUSE BOOKS FROM THE WEST ARE "DISEASED". CADRES WOULD SAY, "THE AMERICANS HAVE MADE YOU INTO ANIMALS; WE WILL MAKE YOU INTO PEOPLE AGAIN." PRESSURE ON INTELLECTUALS WAS ESPECIALLY GREAT, BUT THE PROBLEMS (FOR INTELLECTUALS) HAVE NOW LESSENED, THE TEACHER SAID. TEACHERS ARE AGAIN BEING GIVEN JOBS IN SAIGON, BUT NOT IN THE PROVINCES. SAIGON IS A PARADISE COMPARED TO THE PROVINCES. BIEN HOA, TAY NIN AND XUAN LOC ARE THE WORST, BECAUSE THE CADRE IN THOSE PROVINCES, FROM CENTRAL VIET-NAM, ARE THE MOST FANATICAL. IT IS DIFFICULT AND DANGEROUS FOR NORTHERN CADRE TO HAVE JOBS IN THE PROVINCES - ESPECIALLY IN AN GIANG PROVINCE. NORTHERN CADRE ARE HATED PARTICULARLY BY THE PEASANTS. THERE IS ALSO STILL SOME RESISTANCE IN LONG XUYEN, BEN TRE, AND CAN THO, THE TEACHER SAID. THE SYSTEM OF SURVEILLANCE IS PERVASIVE, WORSE IN CENTRAL VIET-NAM THAN IN SAIGON. ALL ARE TOLD TO SPY ON OTHERS, CHILDREN ON PARENTS, FRIENDS ON FRIENDS, ETC. "I AM VERY LONELY, SINCE I AM NOT SURE WHAT I CAN SAY TO OLD FRIENDS," THE TEACHER COMMENTED. "YOU NEVER HEAR ANYTHING MORE OF THE VIET CONG; THAT WAS ONLY A PRETEXT," THE TEACHER SAID. CORRUPTION IS WORSE THAN IT WAS UNDER THE THIEU REGIME, THE TEACHER SAID, NOTING THAT HE HAD BEEN SYMPATHETIC TO THE VIET CONG BEFORE APRIL, 1975. FINALLY, THE TEACHER TOLD THE JOURNALIST, "GEOGRAPHICALLY AND HISTORICALLY, THE COUNTRY IS UNITED AGAIN, BUT PSYCHOLOGICALLY WE ARE FURTHER APART. THE CADRES EXCLAIM THAT THE "COUNTRY IS

FREE. WE HAVE DONE AWAY WITH THE RICE MERCHANTS OF CHOLON." "IN READLITY," THE TEACHER SAID, "WE HAVE LOST OUR OWN FATHERLAND."

6. WAR WITH CAMBODIA. ONE SENIOR AMBASSADOR IN HANOI TOLD THE JOURNALIST, "TO THESE NORTHERN CADRES NATIONALISM CONFIDENTIAL

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IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAN COMMUNISM. THE EXPANSION TO THE WEST (I.E. LAOS AND CAMBODIA) IS ONE IMPLICATION OF THIS ATTITUDE." HOWEVER, AMONG EDUCATED, LACONIC SOUTHERNERS, ACCORDING TO THE JOURNALIST, THE WAR WITH CAMBODIA IS UNBELIEVEABLE. COMMUNISTS FIGHTING WITH ONE ANOTHER* NO SOUTHERNER BELIEVES THAT THE CAMBODIANS ATTACKED VIET-NAM ON THEIR OWN. WOMEONE MUST BE BEHIND IT, PROBABLY THE CHINESE, SOUTHERNERS SPECULATE. HE FOUND THE WIDESPREAD BELIEF THAT SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT FAITHFULLY FOR THE COUNTRY DURING THE WAR WITH THE U.S., HAVE NO ANSWERS TO EXPLAIN THE WAR WITH CAMBODIA. THE YONG DO NOT WANT TO FIGHT. EIGHTEEN AND NINETEEN YEAR OLDS ARE VERY SKEPTICAL OF THIS WAR, THE JOURNALIST REPORTED. ACCORDING TO ONE AMBASSADOR, THE FIGHTING WITH CAMBODIA IS VERY DESTABILIZING IN THE SOUTH. HANOI IS FEARFUL THAT NEWS OF ATROCITIES, SUCH AS DISEMBOWELMENTS, WILL CREATE PANIC AMONG SOUTHERNERS.

7. THE ECONOMY IN THE SOUTH. THE JOURNALIST FOUND NEAR UNIVERSAL AGREEMENT IN THE SOUTH THAT THE NEW ECONOMIC ZONES ARE A DISASTER, "THE VIETNAMESE EQUIVALENT TO BEING SENT TO SIBERIA." AN AMBASSADOR IN HANOI TOLD HIM THAT IN 1976 THERE WERE ILLUSIONS ABOUT WHAT COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED IN THE SOUTH. SLOWLY, HOWEVER, THE NORTHERNERS REALIZED THAT PERMITTING THE SOUTHERNERS TO PROCEED IN PRETTY MUCH THEIR OWN FASHION MIGHT BE THE BEST MEANS FOR MAINTAINING THE ECONOMY. HANOI SEEMED TO HAVE DECIDED TO COUNT ON EDUCATING THE YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE SOCIALISTS. IN THE MEANTIME, THE ONLY ELEMENT OF THE ECONOMY WHICH SEEMED TO BE FUNCTIONING FAIRLY WELL, THE JOURNALIST SAID, WAS THE CHINESE TRADING AND DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM. (FOLLOWING THE SUBSEQUENT ANNOUNCEMENT MARCH 23 THAT CAPITALIST TRADERS WERE BEING DONE AWAY WITH, THE JOURNALIST PREDICTED ACCELERATED STAGNATION OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ECONOMY. HE SEES THE MOVE AS IDEOLOGICAL, STEMMING FROM DESPERATION OVER THE SORRY STATE OF THE ECONOMY.)

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8. COMMENT: THE MARCH 23 ABOLITION OF CAPITALISH TRADE
REVERSES THE APPROACH OF LEAVING THE SOUTHERN ECONOMY TO
FUNCTION ON ITS OWN. STRIKING AT ONE OF THE FEW WELL
FUNCTIONING SECTORS OF THE SOUTHERN ECONOMY AT A TIME WHEN
HANOI IS ALREADY FACED WITH ACUTE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS NA-
TIONALLY, DEMORALIZATION AND ALIENATION IN THE SOUTH,
AND A WAR WITH CAMBODIAN, MAY SIGNAL A HARDER, MORE
IDEOLOGICAL LINE GENERALLY IN THE SRV IN DEALING WITH THREE
OVER-RIDDING PROBLEMS: A) MANAGEMENT OF THE OVERALL ECONOMY;
B) CAMBODIA; AND C) SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUTH.
REGARDING ALL THREE, WE HAVE NOW SEEN A TOUGHENING OF POLICY.

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9. THE DESCRIPTION BY THE JOURNALIST OF DISAPPOINTMENT,
EVEN DISILLUSIONMENT IN HANOI OVER ECONOMIC AND TECHNICAL
AID AND INVESTMENT FROM THE WEST TALLIES WITH OTHER REPORTS.
SO ALSO SOES HIS BELIEF THAT HANOI HAS OF NECESSITY
TURNED MORE TOWARD MOSCOW, ALTHOUGH HANOI WILL NOT WILLINGLY
SELL ITS INDEPENDENCE TO THE SOVIETS, REGARDLESS OF ITS
DIFFICULTIES, MOREOVER, MOSCOW ITSELF HAS BEEN NIGGARDLY

AND SLOW IN IMPLEMENTING AID PLANS. THUS, IT IS NOT THAT MOSCOW IS PROVIDING SO MUCH ASSISTANCE, BUT THAT THE SOVIETS ARE ALMOST THE ONLY LARGER DONOR. WE ALSO DOUBT THAT THE VIETNAMESE HAVE GIVEN UP HOPE OF AN "AMERICAN CONNECTION". NEVERTHELESS, EDGING TOWARD MOSCOW MAY COST HANOI SOME ROOM FOR MANEUVER.

10. A TOUGHER LINE TOWARD CAMBODIA HAS ALSO BECOME APPARENT, EMBODIED IN THE DECEMBER INVASION OF CAMBODIA AND IN THE OBVIOUS EFFORTS MORE RECENTLY TO TRY TO SUBVERT THE POL POT REGIME.

11. THE "ABOLITION OF CAPITALIST TRADERS" MARCH 23 SIMILARLY TIGHTENS THE IDEOLOGICAL SCREWS IN THE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TASK FOR HANOI OF CONSOLIDATING CONTROL AND EFFECTING SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTH VIET-NAM. THE "CAPITALIST WINDOW" WAS A SEVERE AFFRONT TO SOCIALIST HANOI AND SERVED AS A CONSTANT REMINDER TO THE POPULACE OF A MORE SATISFYING ECONOMIC SYSTEM. IN EFFECT, THOUGH THE SHORT TERM LOSS AND DISSATISFACTION WILL BE CERTAIN, SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY DEMANDED THAT THE "CAPITALIST WINDOW" BE CLOSED FOR LONGER TERM GOALS. HANOI CUT ITS LOSSES FOR THESE IDEOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES. AT THE SAME TIME, THE MOVE WILL RESULT IN A SHORT-TERM GAIN OF RICE AND OTHER STOCKS FROM CHOLON AND ELSEWHERE, BUT THE ESSENTIAL GREASING OF THE SYSTEM, PROVIDED BY THE DEFT, IF CORRUPT CHINESE MERCHANTS, WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL

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LOST AT A TIME WHEN THE SRV NEEDS ALL THE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND BENEFIT IT CAN OBTAIN. THERE SEEMS TO BE NO PROMISING SOCIALIST DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM AVAILABLE AS AN ALTERNATIVE. IT APPEARS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT A SECONDARY CONSIDERATION ON THE PART OF HANOI WAS SECURITY. BEWILDERED BY THE DIFFICULTIES WITH A CAMBODIA BACKED BY PATRONS IN PEKING AND AWARE OF GROWING DISAFFECTION AMONG SOUTHERNERS WITH THE NEW REGIME, HANOI MAY HAVE FEARED THAT THE RICH CHINESE MIGHT PROVIDE A READY "FIFTH COLUMN", WILLING TO BANKROLL SUBVERSION OF HANOI'S ADMINISTRATION IN THE SOUTH. WHITEHOUSE

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